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ABSTRACT

This study assesses the effect of visual versus audio observation/recording on both client and therapist verbal and non-verbal behavior in ongoing therapy. Three co-led, therapy groups were studied over six weekly sessions under counterbalanced observation conditions. Measures of verbal behavior, verbal productivity, and non-verbal behavior were taken along with independent measures of personality and self-reported inhibition. Results indicate that: (1) visual observation has significant negative and detrimental effects in comparison to audio observation on therapeutically meaningful verbal behavior, on self-exploratory verbal behavior, and on rate of verbal behavior; (2) there is an interaction effect for personality variables, with the more extroverted and less neurotic clients evidencing the greater suppression of verbal behavior under videotaping conditions; (3) physical distance between group members decreases significantly under videotaping conditions; and (4) self-reported inhibition does not relate to actual in-session behavior. The results indicate that observation and recording media have significant, differential and intrusive effects on desired, therapeutic client behavior in groups. (Author)

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Observation and Recording Effects on Group Therapy Client Behaviors

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Probably the most widely used of available training models in group psychotherapy involves the observation and/or recording of on-going sessions through the use of one-way mirrors, audio and/or videotape. While a routine and accepted practice, the effects and impact of observation (and the media of observation) on client behavior largely have been ignored; and, where described, have relied heavily on anecdotal and impressionistic data. The advantages of recording sessions (e.g., the non-biased, non-distorted recall of therapy process) have been bolstered largely by rationalizations of the disadvantages of recording (e.g., initially observed client and therapist anxiety tends to dissipate after the first few sessions; c.f., Levin and Kanter, 1964)

Empirical tests of the effects of observation and of observational media, while few in number and quality, have focused primarily on individual therapy. Gelso (1973), in reviewing this research, has noted that: (a) therapists are not good reporters of the effects of recording on clients, and (b) recording does not affect all individual therapy clients similarly. To date, no empirical research has been reported with regard to client behavior in group psychotherapy.

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The present study was designed to assess the effects of

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visual observation (videotape and one-way mirror observation) as compared to audio recording on both patient and therapist behaviors in on-going group psychotherapy.

Three University Counseling Center therapy groups, meeting weekly for six sessions, were studied under counterbalanced observation conditions for three sessions each of audio and visual/video recording. Group members were "natural" clients, i.e., students who had voluntarily sought therapeutic services from the Counseling Center and had been screened as appropriate for group treatment.

Groups were co-led by one female and one male therapist, either a professional staff member or advanced graduate student/intern in training. Administration of the group therapy questionnaire (Wile, Bron, and Pollack, 1970) to the group leaders affirmed that none of the six therapists would be described as inexperienced.

Client behavior as a dependent variable was assessed by means of independent measures of both verbal and non-verbal behaviors. Two independent rating scales of verbal behavior were used: (1) the Hill Interaction Matrix and (2) the Helpee Self-Exploration Scale; as well as a quantitative measure of verbal productivity, i.e., number of statements per session emitted by client. Non-verbal behavior was measured by: (1) the incidence of physical contact between clients and (2) the average physical distance between clients during each group session. The Eysenck Personality Inventory was administered

to each client prior to the first experimental group session to assess, as an independent variable, the relationship between personality (neuroticism and introversion-extroversion) and verbal behavior under different observational conditions. A post-group questionnaire was administered, as well, to assess felt-inhibition in the expression of problems or feelings during the two recording conditions. Both clients and therapists were informed of and consented to the research observation, but were uninformed of the specific hypotheses being studied until after all data was collected.

Three ten minute segments from each of the eighteen group meetings were selected on a random, time-sampling basis for analysis. Two trained judges rated independently the tapes according to standardized procedures for all measures. Briefly, the results indicate that:

1. Visual observation (i.e., videotape and one-way mirror) has significant negative and detrimental effects in comparison to audiotape recording on therapeutically meaningful, client verbal behavior, on self-exploratory verbal behavior, and on the incidence of verbal behavior. Clients are more verbally productive and emit more member-centered, direct and problem-focused content under conditions of audiorecording than in videorecording conditions. In videorecording, clients are significantly less likely to actively and spontaneously engage in an inward probing to discover new feelings and experiences.
2. There is an interaction effect for personality variables,

with the more extroverted and the less "neurotic" clients evidencing greater suppression of therapeutically meaningful verbal behavior in video (vs. audio) conditions.

3. Physical contact occurred too infrequently for measurement and comparison. However, physical distance between members was significantly decreased (i.e., members sat closer together) under the videotaping conditions, in comparison to audiorecorded meetings. And,

4. self-reported, post-group expressions of inhibition do not relate to rated measures of in-session, verbal behavior in either audio or video recorded conditions.

Discussion:

These results confirm consistently that visual/video observation of clients has a relatively detrimental effect on the frequency and quality of verbalization in group psychotherapy. Although limited in generality by the relatively small N of subjects ($N = 22$), the data gain strength from the fact that this was not an analogue study of effects. Trained therapists and real clients seeking help for social-emotional problems were observed; and the study period (6 sessions) extended beyond that usually quoted (anecdotally) as sufficient to produce an abatement of initially observed anxiety and inhibition.

The finding that the observed inhibitory effect was greatest for extroverted clients and for clients scoring low on the Eysenck Neuroticism Scale perhaps is explained most parsimoniously by the fact that these clients are most likely to have a higher

baseline of verbalization (in both quantity and quality), thus, a greater likelihood to evidence change in generally perceived more inhibitory conditions.

Non-verbal behavior and its relationship to observation conditions in therapy has not been studied previously. Our finding of decreased inter-member distance in the videorecording condition (clients sat on average one foot closer together), while implying perhaps a greater sense of group cohesion, is explained more consistently as a "huddling" phenomenon under conditions of perceived threat.

The moral of this study appears to be that clients should be heard but not seen if the therapeutic gain is to outweigh the face-valid advantages of visual observation for training functions. Van Atta (1969) found that clients most disturbed by the prospect of recording never show up at agencies which acquire a reputation for using these methods. There is a serious cost-benefit question raised by these findings for agencies committed both to training and service. The mythology (Gelso, 1973) that observation effects are non-intrusive needs to be debunked. Self-reports of non-inhibiton appear to have little to no relationship to in-group behavior for both clients and therapists; and more systematic, extensive, and empirical studies are demanded.

In the absence, currently, of more research, agencies employing recordings for training purposes might well take more intensive and serious steps toward desensitizing clients and

therapists to observational media. Clearly, "informed consent" needs to go beyond the typical first session mention that recording and observational media are present and or used. Moreover, an ethical dilemma is posed and demands attention if the client who contracts for services objects to the use of observation media in the pursuit of training. Some agencies appear to promulgate a sort of therapeutic double-talk in their apparent attempt to deal with this issue. Most notably, Bloom and Dobie (1969) write that group patients are informed that if it became apparent that therapy suffered, the presence of observers could be discontinued. Translated, this implies that the client's therapy has greater importance than the institution's commitment to training. The authors then go on to outline guidelines for the noninterference of observers. Included among these is the following: "reactions to the observers are treated as is any other manifestation of resistance and transference." The only possible translation of this statement is that "if you express hostility or distrust or inhibition, etc., we will view that as neurotic. We will protect our intent to train!" If our intent is to train clinicians skilled in helping people come to grips with problems for which they seek help, we need to pay more serious attention to ways in which we step on our own toes in the process.

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